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ABSTRACT

A successful classroom bulletin board display should not only be decorative, but also must have clear-cut purposes and functions: informational (i.e., post current school news), instructional (i.e., expand on classroom units), and motivational (i.e., tap subliminal awareness). Some suggested techniques include (1) using space other than the bulletin board (the door, area around the clock) as well as the board itself; (2) making collages of faces or of various materials (cloth, metal, wood) organized around a central theme; (3) putting up pictures traced with an overhead projector and letters cut from various old posters; (4) putting up pictures, cast-off commercial displays, cartoon strips, and political cartoons for which students can supply captions and write stories; and (5) making students responsible for preparing bulletin board displays. (MF)

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BULLETIN BOARDS: THE GREAT CORKBOARD WASTELAND

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"I'm no artist!"

"Too much time and trouble!"

"What good are they?"

"The only reason I put stuff on it is to cover it up."

"Bulletin boards are a woman's thing; only women like to fuss with them."

Such are the comments teachers often make about bulletin boards. Why such a negative reaction to what could be for them and is for many a useful classroom tool?

For one thing, the whole teacher-bulletin board relationship gets off on the wrong foot right at the beginning of the school year. The empty expanse of the bulletin board is one of the first things that the teacher sees upon entering the classroom in the fall. The expanse demands attention; its bleakness cannot be ignored, cannot be hidden, cannot be shoved into a corner; it is ever present--a nettlesome, worrisome, nagging bother. And the blankety-blank thing grows more intimidating as time passes. Its persistent clamor for attention intrudes itself into the thousand-and-one other details that confront the teacher in September.

Short of having a planned display ready to go, there are several make-shift ways a teacher can cope with the problem; none of these are really satisfying: (1) He can throw something up in a hurry, simply to cover the area until he has more time to devote to it (This usually results in thumbtacking up a number of tired pages from LIFE, or arranging a geometric pattern of dust jackets from recent library acquisitions, or creating a collage of antediluvian, and therefore, irrelevant, newspaper clippings drawn in desperation from the teacher's files); (2) He can turn the job over to willing (and, hopefully, creative) students, who, more often than not, attempt to duplicate a bulletin board that impressed them in the fourth grade, one that is complete with red and gold leaves, bushy-tailed squirrels, and lots of nuts; (3) He can pin up the plethora of printed announcements that come his way during the first few weeks of school. On the other hand, the teacher may not choose to "cope" at all and just leave the damned thing blank. This alternative, however, requires great mental discipline and emotional stability; in the long haul, it is not a real alternative for the faint-hearted.

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Some teachers dislike bulletin boards because they seem to call for talents that they don't have, or they imagine they don't have. Many teachers feel genuinely insecure about their artistic abilities; the bulletin board, they feel, exposes their deficiencies. They resent that feeling of inadequacy. Still other teachers really can't see any educational value in a display that stays on the wall for two, four, or more weeks.

An initial negative mind set about bulletin boards, however it has been acquired, is hard to shake. Some teachers never overcome it--also, they don't read articles about bulletin boards.

So, for you positive thinkers who have read this far, here are some ideas and

techniques to consider. A blank bulletin board is a drag; it is an affront to the student (whether he knows it or not), mute testimony to the teacher's perception of instructional possibilities, and perhaps a comment on the importance the teacher attaches to his job. A poor bulletin board is also a drag; it will be worth to the students exactly what it is worth to the teacher. A haphazard, incidental bulletin board probably will not be very satisfying to the teacher or to his students. Effective displays require time and effort. More to the point, every successful wall display succeeds because it has a clear-cut purpose and function. Such a purpose may fall into one of three broad categories:

1. Informational
2. Instructional
3. Motivational

By informational bulletin boards I mean those that are used to post announcements and other items pertinent to life at school and in the classroom (menus, schedules, calendars, community events, rosters, regulations, etc.), but not directly connected with subject matter or instructional procedure. The utility of such bulletin boards is obvious, and I shall not elaborate upon it, except to observe that the material must be kept current if it is to be effective. A teacher who cares will attempt to present even the most lifeless of such materials in an attractive fashion; after all, he does want to direct his students' positive attention to the informational items he has posted. I want to say at this point that I feel a bulletin board must be more than merely decorative. Pure decoration, it seems, leads eventually to mediocrity, a triteness that one so often finds exemplified in the "seasonal" type of display--you know, the golden autumn leaves (a bit silly in seasonless Arizona), the hexagonal snowflakes and carrot-nosed snowmen (even sillier), the daisies of spring, and the ol'-swimmin'-hole-barefoot-boy-with-cheek-of-tan bit. These cliches may be colorful, but they are also unimaginative, unproductive, and dull.

The instructional bulletin board must speak clearly; it must be neither too broad nor too narrow in concept. Very likely it will relate to a unit or general topic currently being considered. Ideally, it should not repeat what has been said in class, but rather should illustrate or amplify basic concepts or principles. For example, a teacher considering the short story could probably do better than to display portraits of short story writers or dust jackets from collections of short stories. Instead, he might show in some linear form how the action of a short story develops from exposition through complication, climax, and denouement. I have in mind a length of cord or yarn mounted over carefully selected and condensed portions of a specific short story to depict visually the course of the story's action. If the action of the story lends itself to it, sketches of the critical points of the story could be included. Thus a principle is depicted--a facet of the short story that the student can apply to all subsequent experiences with it. An instructional bulletin board can also be thematic. A unit on courage, for example, would undoubtedly develop the idea that there are many kinds of courage and courageous people that do not fit into our usual definitions. A group of pictures from magazines might show persons acting in various ways that would not normally be considered courageous, but are, in fact, quite bold in the light of the student's expanded concept of courage. This illustration, by the way, calls attention to the fact that every teacher needs to become a dedicated newspaper and magazine clipper. A good picture file is part of every competent teacher's portfolio.

It is an interesting and useful feature of instructional bulletin boards that

they may be progressively, or accretively done, that is, they may grow along with the student's grasp of the matter being considered. The students themselves can undertake the construction of such displays. I'm thinking of a simple example in which a bulletin board is used to show how the English language goes about producing variant forms from a base word through inflections, prefixes and suffixes, back-formations, and what not (cook, cooks, cooking, cooked, cooker, cookery, cookie, uncooked, pre-cooked, fry-cook, cook out, cook-out, cookout, cook up, etc.). Students can and will handle such activities with enthusiasm--the expanding bulletin board reflects their growing knowledge and capability. A word of caution: Make the display the responsibility of no more than three or four students at a time to avoid inconsistency and chaos. Give them all a chance, but on different projects.

The motivational potential of bulletin boards has been largely overlooked, and it's hard to understand why. In these days when psychologists and advertisers are playing around with our subconscious minds, when subliminal motivation is being used to induce a desired behavior, it seems incredible that educators have not recognized the bulletin board as a powerful vehicle and medium for this kind of activity. Hasn't McLuhan announced to us all that the medium is the message? Somehow, we haven't gotten the message. The bulletin board is always before the student's eye; it is as ubiquitous and as unobtrusive as the canned music in the restaurant, the department store, and the supermarket. If Madison Avenue is right, there must be a way to sell syntax and spelling with sex. Can't we imply, somehow, that the serious student gets the girls? Can't we squeeze some creature comfort out of composition?

Seriously, cleverly-constructed bulletin boards do built positive attitudes toward literature and language. Try this as a bulletin board caption: "When You're Feeling Groovy, You Know How a Poet Feels". Above or below this, splash some groovy verse from Buson, William Carlos Williams, Whitman, Auden, Yeats, Ferlinghetti, Rossetti, Donne, McKuen, Cummings, Shakespeare, Browning--you name your own groove! Of course, the stuff has to be real; a trickster will be exposed in short order when he uses phoney devices. Or give examples of levels of word usage (connotative hierarchies), an understanding of which may be essential to social, economic, and, sometimes, physical well-being. A caption: "Want to Put Your Best Mouth Forward?" Then follow with examples: Call him "fuzz" when you are talking ABOUT but not TO a policeman. Divide the board into right and left halves; head the left half "Call him a . . ." and the right half ". . . but not a . . ." Differentiate between morticians and undertakers, garbage collectors and sanitation engineers, old folks and senior citizens, etc. Punch home the idea that a smart choice of words in a given situation may spell the difference between getting what you want and not getting it, between success and failure, between survival and death. Sure, you are playing around with examples of euphemisms, but the core idea or principle is important. Graphically presented, this is a powerful message. Let's get a clue from the TV and magazine ads. If subliminal motivation and glorified packaging can sell soap and deodorant and dog food, they can sell ideas as well. Approaches of this kind not only make learning easier, but also more certain. We must disabuse ourselves of the notion that education, like an antiseptic, is efficacious in direct proportion to the discomfort and pain it produces. Knowledge and skills are commodities; instead of shoving them down students' throats, we should create a desire, a craving, an envy. Human nature is there; it's easier to have it as an ally than as an enemy.

These are the purposes and functions of bulletin boards. Now let's consider a few of the techniques useful in attaining those purposes. A bulletin board

should be an attention-grabber; it must attract notice before it can do anything else. It must not be passive or dull. Pleasing or startling arrangements of color, texture, form, and design evoke the kind of response we want. Again we can learn a lot from current advertising practices. An unconventional kind of presentation makes a stronger impression than something we have seen before. Unusual juxtapositions of colors and forms and ideas stimulate and engage our attention. Let's not hesitate to manipulate ideas, objects, pictures, words into new combinations to get across our message.

Here are some specific ideas:

1. Consider the bulletin board to be an organic thing, an integral part of the whole classroom that functions as a teaching tool. It isn't necessary to confine ourselves to boundaries of the board. I've never hesitated to lap over the edges as far as necessary when I needed more space or when I wished to tie several displays together into a unit. I have used an entire 12' x 38' wall as a bulletin board.

2. A door is an excellent bulletin board; the students use it every time they leave the room. It has high visibility and strategic location.

3. The wall space around the clock is a marvelous place for mounting subliminal messages, e.g., the correct spelling of a word that everyone has been having trouble with, or the new word for the day (for those of you who build vocabulary systematically). Reminders to students can also go there; they will be certain to see them.

4. Nothing is quite so consistently fascinating as the human face. Cut pictures of them out of magazines, mount them, and write balloon speeches for them. There is a face for nearly every emotion; a collage of faces is a good device to emphasize and dramatize point of view.

5. Collages are not hodge-podges. Choose a theme. But use esoteric materials--pages from old texts, indexes, telephone directories, mail-order catalogs, old dictionaries, class rosters, cloth, metal, wire, wood, plants, shells, etc.

6. Grocery stores and department stores will sometimes part with used commercial displays. Parts or all of these commercially-produced materials will be helpful in producing classroom displays.

7. Can't letter? Know nothing about graphics? Then cut out letters from newspaper and magazine ads. Or better still, collect all those posters the students make for campaigns, parties, dances, and other activities, cut out the letters individually, put them into a cardboard box, and you'll soon have enough of all colors, styles, and sizes to letter any bulletin board attractively. Your students can also cut out letters for you; the letters need not be uniform.

8. Can't draw? Use a slide, overhead, or opaque projector to project any picture or design you want against the bulletin board; then trace it! The same thing works nicely for lettering, especially for increasing its size to proper proportions.

9. Comic strips will copy nicely in the Thermofax. Blot out speech balloons and project against bulletin board; copy the strip. Have composition students create new story line and dialog. Works great for slow readers, too.

10. Blow up all cartoons the same way. Write new captions. Insert the faces of student photos from your class for added interest.

11. Pictures are superb motivational devices for writing description and narration. Select a provocative picture, mount it, devise lettering to ask: What is going on here? What happened before this picture was taken? What will happen next? Who are these people? How are they related? What do they think of each other?

12. Political or comic cartoons clustered around a central idea will attract immediate attention.

13. Chances are that nothing the teacher can put up on the bulletin board will arouse as much comment as those things which the students produce and mount themselves. For this to be valuable from an educational standpoint, it must have purpose; and, of course, the exercise of predetermining the purpose of a display is valuable to student and teacher alike. Control and planning are the key factors in this sort of activity. Students pictorial themes, photographs that tell a story, collages that illustrate a point, projects and displays that outline a process--all these call for organizational and reasoning skills that can hardly be taught better in another way.

Any enthusiastic teacher can improvise and improve upon these ideas. That enthusiasm is probably the first requirement for any effective teaching. With regard to bulletin boards, the next requirement that must be met is that the teacher recognize the strategic value of the device. A well-planned display catches the student's eye again and again during the day; his attention will return to it day after day. Something that prominent in the room has got to have an important function; it can have only if it is well-planned and wisely conceived.

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